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CIA gears up for massive aid to rebels

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WASHINGTON — The Central Intelligence Agency has big plans for anti-Sandinista rebels, if Congress approves President Reagan's \$100 million aid request.

First priority, according to administration and congressional sources briefed by intelligence officials, would be building the contras into a potent fighting force, with the aid of U.S. military advisers, capable of seizing and controlling Nicaraguan territory and expanding the civil war throughout the country.

They also would be supplied with greater firepower — perhaps portable antiaircraft missiles or helicopter gunships — to counter Nicaragua's Soviet-supplied Mi-24 helicopters.

The sources said Gen. John Galvin, head of the U.S. Southern Command in Panama, already was developing a contra training program similar to the one in El Salvador that would assign U.S. military advisers to rebel camps in Honduras.

It would be the first time that U.S. military personnel would be involved in training the Nicaraguan insurgents.

Although American advisers would not enter Nicaragua, sources said, CIA briefers did not rule out the possibility that advisers of other nationalities, working under CIA contracts, might accompany the rebels into Nicaragua to supervise important operations.

Latin Americans working for the CIA conducted the most spectacular actions attributed to the insurgents between 1982 and 1984, such as mining Nicaraguan harbors and attacking the Corinto oil-storage facility on the Nicaraguan Pacific coast.

CIA plans for the contras emerged from recent secret briefings to the congressional intelligence committees and informal briefings for individual congressional aides and in interviews with congressional and administration sources with access to classified information.

"The idea conveyed to us," said a congressional source briefed by the CIA, "is that within a year, the press will stop talking about how ineffective the contras are. They told us that in a year or less some spectacular

actions in Nicaragua would start happening. We were told that one goal is to create the perception that the contras are as legitimate as the Salvadoran guerrillas or the Afghan freedom fighters."

The Democrat-controlled House Intelligence Committee, which rejected Reagan's funding proposal by a 9-7 vote March 5, provided some details about CIA plans for the contras in an 18-page report released Wednesday and reportedly based in part on a secret CIA briefing the day before the vote.

At that briefing, CIA officials suggested that if Congress passed Reagan's proposal, the spy agency planned to resume direction of the insurgency and covert operations to assist it, the sources said.

The committee report said that although the new proposal resembled previous White House requests for contra aid, it differed in its "size, in the number of resistance fighters proposed to be armed and the intensity of warfare that will likely result if it's approved."

Reagan's request is the largest funding proposal since the contras were formed in 1982 to seek the overthrow of the Sandinista regime, which came to power in 1979. It includes \$70 million in military aid and \$30 million in nonlethal assistance.

The sources said that under a new covert program, the CIA would give the rebels a comprehensive war plan, seek to more than double their current size and give them the ability to seize and hold territory for the

first time since the conflict began.

"Approval by the House of the President's request means a commitment to a force 2 or 2½ times its present size," the report said.

Although estimates of the contra force vary, congressional sources said they interpreted the goal of increasing the rebel army to mean the insurgency would grow beyond 30,000 fighters.

The sources said the purpose of seizing territory was to establish a presence inside Nicaragua and a secure supply base. Supply problems are blamed for the recent retreat of contras to bases in Honduras. CIA briefers also suggested that with captured territory, the contras would show that the Sandinistas were losing control.